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AUTHOR McKinney, Bruce C.
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ABSTRACT

A review of the literature indicates that while organizational climate has received much attention in the field of organizational communication, it has been studied largely as a worker's perception of his or her work environment as assessed by self-report measures. Reliance upon those perceptual measures has created controversy as to whether (1) organizational climate is an attribute of the organization or perceiving individual, (2) workers can come to a perceptual consensus regarding their perceived work environment, and (3) job satisfaction and organizational climate are redundant dimensions. If research in organizational climate is to progress in the next decade, researchers will have to make use of more objective measures to validate perceptual data, such as nonparticipant observers recording critical behavior sequences among members of organizations. (FL)

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ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE: A SUMMARY OF RESEARCH AND CONTROVERSY

Bruce C. McKinney

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Bruce C. McKinney (M.A., the Pennsylvania State University, 1980) is Instructor of Communication Arts, Department of Communication Arts, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, Virginia 22807.

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ABSTRACT

Organizational climate has received much attention in the field of organizational communication. It has been studied mostly as a worker's perception of his/her work environment utilizing self-report measures to assess these perceptions. Reliance upon these perceptual measures has created controversy on three dimensions: (1) whether organizational climate is an attribute of the organization or perceiving individual, (2) whether workers can come to a perceptual consensus regarding their perceived work environment, and, (3) whether job satisfaction and organizational climate are redundant dimensions. The literature surrounding the above problems is reviewed, and recommendations are made for future research in organizational climate to clear up some of the aforementioned controversies.

ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE: A SUMMARY OF RESEARCH AND CONTROVERSY

The concept of organizational climate has received much attention in the field of organizational communication (Litwin & Stringer, 1968; Campbell, Dunnette, Lawler, & Weick, 1970; Johannesson, 1973; Guion, 1973; James & Jones, 1974; Hellriegel & Slocum, 1974; Muchinsky, 1976; Johnston, 1976; Hitt & Zikmund, 1977; Albrec , 1979; Spriner & Gable, 1980); however, it appears to be a concept that has yielded much confusion and controversy. Researchers appear unable to come to a consensus regarding what organizational climate <u>is</u>, and how it should be measured.

Albrect (1979) points out that researchers in the fields of communication and organizational behavior have attempted to define orgainizational climate as a description of the "cognitive" environment as perceived by employees of an organization. Tagiuri and Litwin (1968) see organizational climate as "the relatively enduring quality of the internal environment of an organization that (a) is experienced by its members, (b) influences their behavior, and (c) can be described in terms of the values of a particular set of characteristics (or attributes) of the organization" (p. 27). Dennis (1975) defines climate as " a subjective experienced quality of the internal environment of an organization; the concept embraces a general cluster of inferred predispositons identifiable through reports of members' perceptions of message and message related events occurring in the organization" (p. 4). Schneider, Donaghy, and Newman (1976) perceive climate as the extent to which employees perceive empathy, encouragement for participation, and a communication structure which meets their information needs. Finally, Johnson (1977) sees climate as the "pattern of how people talk to one another as well as what they talk about" (p. 124).

The purpose of this review is to: (1) outline the present confusion and controversy in organizational climate research, and (2) make recommendations for future research in the area of organizational climate.

The Diversity in Organizational Climate Research

Guion (1973) cites the diversity in research used to examine the concept of organizational climate: (1) perceptual questionnaires, (2) experimental manipulation of stimuli, and, (3) objective measurements of organizational variables. James and Jones (1974) have noted this diversity as well. In an extensive review of the climate literature, James and Jones classify three separate approaches to the measurement of organizational climate: (1) multiple measurement-organizational attribute approach, (2) perceptual measurement-organizational attribute approach, and, (3) perceptual measurement-individual attribute approach.

The multiple measurement-organizational attribute approach refers to objective measurements of organizational variables such as structure, size, complexity, leadership style, and goal directions. The perceptual measurement-organizational attribute appraoch utilizes questionnaires that ask an individual to assess his/her perceptions of an organization usually via a Likert scale. The perceptual measurement-individual attribute approach views organizational climate as an individual attribute, which describes organizational climate as a set of global perceptions held by individuals about their work environment.

Most researchers in the area of organizational communication seem content to utilize perceptual measurements to tap organizational climate (Litwin & Stringer, 1968; Friedlander & Marguilles, 1969; Schneider & Bartlett, 1970; Payne & Pheysey, 1971), and treat organizational climate as the sum perception of the individuals in a work environment. Usually, organizational climate is seen as having

such dimensions as: individual autonomy, degree of structure imposed on situation, reward orientation, consideration, warmth, and support (Campbell et al., 1970). As Litwin and Stringer (1968) define organizational climate, it is " . . . a set of measurable properties of work environment, perceived directly or indirectly by the people who live and work in this environment and assumed to influence their motivation and behavior" (p. 1). This definition of organizational climate encompasses the basic premise of most definitions of organizational climate--that it is a perception by a worker about his/her work environment.

Organizational climate, as measured by the perceptual approach, proceeds in the following way:

> Researchers have "measured climate" by having participants indicate the extent to which a number of items characterize individual work work situations. Responses are item or factor analyzed to identify the dimensions of climate (Johannesson, 1973; p. 119).

The questions which are used to measure organizational climate are usually those developed by Litwin and Stringer (1968) or adapted from Litwin and Stringer, i.e., La Follette and Sims (1975).

However, when using these perceptual measures, there is a great deal of diversity as to what is being measured. Some researchers use a perceptual measurement-individual attribute approach while others utilize a perceptual measurement-organizational attribute approach. This brings up one of the major controversies in organizational climate research: Is organizational climate an attribute of the organization or an attribute of the individual?

The Individual-Organizational Attribute Controversy

Guion (1973) asks whether organizational climate (as measured by perceptual questionnaires) was referring to attributes of organizations

or attributes of individuals:

> The idea of "organizational climate" appears to refer to an attribute or set of attributes of the work environment. The idea of "perceived organizational climate" seems ambiguous; one can not be sure whether it implies an attribute of the organization or of the perceiving individual (Guion, 1973; p. 120).

Guion argues that unless there is some objective, external measure of a characteristic of the environment itself, one cannot determine how accurate the perceptions of this environment are.

James and Jones (1974) advance this argument by claiming that if you are measuring individual attributes, or how a worker perceives his work environment, it should be called psychological climate. On the one hand, if someone is measuring organizational attributes, stimuli, or main effects of the organization, this should be called organizational climate. A major problem with organizational climate research is that some are measuring individual attributes (psychological climate), while others are measuring organizational attributes (organizational climate) and are all classifying this as perceived organizational climate. There is a need in future climate research for an explicit dichotomy between psychological climate referring to attributes of individuals within an organization, and organizational climate referring to attributes of the external environment.

However, when using perceptual measures, other problems arise. Johannesson (1971) notes that when perceptual measures are employed "there are potentially as many climates as there are people in the organization" (p. 30). This refers to the next problem in organizational climate research: Employees cannot come to a perceptual consensus regarding their organizational climate.

The Perceptual Consensus Controversy

Those who use perceptual measures of organizational climate assume that workers within a given organization can come to a perceptual consensus regarding the climate of their organization. However, this notion has been challenged by several researchers. Stern (1970) failed to find a perceptual consensus within a single department of a company. Johnston (1976) found two substantially different perceptions of climate in a small, single-office firm. The dependent variable Johnson used in his study was number of years with the company. Employees who were with the company for three or more years were termed "first generation" employees. Employees who had been with the company for six months to two years were classified as "second generation" employees. Based on his research, Johnston concluded that first, as opposed to second generation employees: (1) saw the climate and structure, systems and practices as basically functional and supportive of productive performance, (2) felt the organization had not shifted away from emphasis on innovation, creativity, and quality in its approach to its task assignment and toward standardization, and saw no decline in the quality of products of the organization, and, (3) described more success in dealing with superior-subordinate and work pressure problems. These results led Johnston to conclude:

> The existence of two climates within a single organization raises questions about the current definition of the concept of organizational climate and its predicative value for the study of behavior in organizations (Johnston, 1976; p. 95).

It should be noted that Johnston did not use perceptual questionnaires to measure climate; rather, he used unstructured interviews lasting about one to one-and-a-half hours with each employee. However, the information derived from these interviews still reflects employees' perceptions about their organizational climate.

Hitt and Zikmund (1977) examined the problem of consensus and/or diversity among individual's perceptions of organizational climate. They studied two separate organizations: a division of a major service organization in the communications industry and a smaller company that manufactured dental supplies. They found a high degree of diversity among organizational members' perceptions of the climate in the large service organization, but found a high degree of consensus among members' percetions of organizational climate in the smaller dental supply company. Hitt and Zikmund conclude: "These results support the intuitive conclusion that size may be an important factor in the potential diversity or consensus of perceptions of organizational climate" (p. 66). Though the preceding conclusion seems a logical one, it should be noted that in Johnston's study the total sample size was only 39, and yet there was a great deal of diversity in the perceived organizational climate. Size may play an important role with respect to consensus/diversity of a perceived organizational climate, but research in this area does not consistently support this assertion.

The problem with describing organizational climate as the sum of perceptions of individuals in a work environment is the crux of the perceptual consensus problem. It would seem questionable if employees within an organization all perceived the same "climate." There are many variables in any organization that would tend to affect each worker's perception of his/her environment; such as, longevity with company, position in organizational hierarchy, physical location of workplace, styles of management (i.e., democratic, authortarian), etc.

Other researchers (Gorman & Malloy, 1973; Payne & Mansfield, 1973) have found significant differences in perceptions of organizational climate by members of an organization. It would appear that with the diversity found in members' perceptions of organizational climate,

perceptual measures create more confusion regarding organizational climate than clarify particular climates of particular organizations. Payne, Fineman, and Wall (1976) point out that many studies of organizational climate lack validity because they do not produce an adequate consensus by which climate measures could be said to validly describe an organization. At best, each organization probably has many subclimates. "At the macrolevel there are overall impressions of the organization. At the microlevel there are impressions of a work division in which an employee is assigned, and perhaps the analysis can be reduced even further. Climate at these various levels within the particular organization needs to be recognized as potentially differential" (Hellweg, 1982; p. 13).

The third controversy this review examines is one that perhaps best represents the problem of measuring organizational climate perceptually: The climate-satisfaction controversy.

The Climate-Satisfaction Controversy

Many studies have attempted to show a relationship between organizational climate and job satisfaction (Friedlander & Marguiles, 1969; Pritchard & Karasick, 1973; Lawler, Hall, & Oldham, 1974; LaFollette & Sims, 1975; Churchill, Ford, & Walker, 1976; Muchinsky, 1977). In these studies, organizational climate is usually the independent variable and job satisfaction is the dependent variable and "job satisfaction often varies according to the subject's perception of his organizational climate" (Hellriegel & Slocum, 1974; p. 263).

A variety of perceptual measures have been used to measure organizational climate; however, most are similar to the original climate questionnaire developed by Litwin and Stringer (1968). Job satisfaction is usually measured via the Job Descriptive Index (JDI) developed by Smith, Kendall, and Hulin (1969). The JDI, like the climate

questionnaire, is a perceptual measure. Job satisfaction is defined as what is expected and "what is experienced in relation to the alternatives available in a given situation" (Smith et al., 1969; p. 6). The JDI . . .

> is intended to measure the affective responses to this difference by measuring feelings associated with different facets of the job situation. Specifically, the JDI measures satisfaction over five areas of a job: the work itself, the supervision, the co-worker, the pay, and the opportunities for future promotion on the job (LaFollette & Sims, 1975; p. 261).

Once the organizational climate questionnaire and JDI have been completed, a factor analysis is performed on each scale. The resultant factors from each scale are then correlated with each other. Researchers then look to see if any dimension of job satisfaction correlates significantly with any dimension of organizational climate.

In this type of research, job satisfaction is seen as an evaluation of one's work environment and organizational climate is seen as a description of one's work environment. However, this type of research has brought the criticism that organizational climate and job satisfaction are redundant dimensions of a work environment. Johannesson (1973) criticizes climate-satisfaction research on several levels: (1) measures of organizational climate have borrowed items from job satisfaction measures, (2) both dimensions use similar or identical methods of measurement, and, (3) workers cannot be expected to describe their work environment (climate) without being affected by their satisfaction with their organizational climate. Johannesson states:

> If feelings heavily influence descriptions of perceptions, or the perceptions themselves, how can derivitives of them be called satisfaction dimensions at one point in time and climate dimensions at another? (p. 122).

In other words, a worker cannot describe his/her environment (climate) without being influenced by his feelings or affective responses to

that environment (satisfaction).

Aside from the fact that climate measures have borrowed heavily from satisfaction measures,[1] an examination of the first item on the Litwin and Stringer Organizational Climate Questionnaire (Form B) exemplifies the problem between description and evaluation:

> The jobs in this organization are clearly defined and logically structured.

According to those who claim that satisfaction and climate are independent dimensions, the above statement is as description and not an evaluation. If someone were to ask me if my job was clearly defined and logically structured, I would have to make some type of evaluation to cone to a conclusion. In answering this question, I will be describing my evaluation of my job. My perception of my job's organization and structure will affect how I evaluate, and in turn, describe my work environment.

LaFollette and Sims (1975) in their article "Is Satisfaction Redundant with Organizational Climate?" disagree with Johannesson's redundancy hypothesis. They claim that though they found significant correlations between measures of organizational climate and job satisfaction, these two dimensions related differently to a third variable--job performance "which tends to cast serious doubts on the redundancy hypothesis" (p. 275). LaFollette and Sims state that since job satisfaction and organizational climate do not have significant correlations with measures of job performance, they are different dimensions. They criticize Johannesson's claim that job satisfaction and organizational climate are redundant dimensions because they had statistically significant relationships. This is due to what LaFollette and Sims call a "premptory acceptance" [sic] of one of the four explanations available when two variables correlate with each other significantly (Johannesson uses explanation #1):

1. A and B are redundant.
2. A causes B or B causes A.
3. A correlates with B, but are not determinants of each other as when A and B are both causally related to a third variable but are not causally related nor redundant with each other.
4. A and B are related by happenstance as when two variables exhibit statistical covariance, but no logical explanation to define the relationship can be found (p. 275).

LaFollette and Sims state that "a statistical significant relationship, by itself, is no proof of redundancy, nor is it proof of causality" (p. 274) and take exception with Johannesson for "blindly" accepting the redundancy hypothesis. While LaFollette and Sims do offer a substantive argument for rejecting the redundancy hypothesis, this still does not answer the crucial question in the climate-satisfaction controversy: Can a worker describe his/her work environment without evaluating this environment? I think not.

The climate-satisfaction controversy has yet to be resolved, and as LaFollette and Sims aptly conclude: "The fact that organizational climate and satisfaction are related in some manner is patently clear from the literature . . . Yet, whether one accepts the redundancy assumption or the causalty assumption remains largely a matter of subjective judgement" (p. 276).

Suggestions for Future Research

The preceding review was to demonstrate the diversity and confusion in research in organizational climate. Confusion centers around: (1) whether organizational climate refers to attributes of organizations or attributes of individuals, (2) the fact that workers cannot come to a perceptual consensus about their work environment, and, (3) whether organizational climate, when measured perceptually, is redundant with job satisfaction.

If research in organizational climate is going to progress in the next decade, researchers will have to make use of objective measures to validate perceptual measures. Guion states:

> The construct validity of a measure of perception of a climate variable is related to the question of the accuracy of these perceptions, i.e., the accuracy of predicting (or identifying) an objective measure of the reality being perceived. Unless there is such an objective, external measure of the characteristic of the environment itself, the question of accuracy of perception cannot be answered (Guion, 1973; p. 129).

In other words, there is a need for an objective measure of the reality being perceived to validate these perceptions against.[2] If used in conjunction with objective measures, these subjective measures would measure the psychological climate of the individual worker and be regarded as an individual attribute. Objective measures would measure the organizational climate and be regarded as organizational attributes. One of the more pressing concerns in using aggregated perceptual data is whether this data represents actual conditions in a given situation (Jones & James, 1979). The use of objective measures might resolve this dilemma.

Objective measures could be the use of non-participant observers to measure climate via recording critical behavior sequences among members of organizations, such as how crises are handled, how work is assigned, or how rewards are distributed (Johannesson, 1973). The use of trained non-participant observers might avoid the pitfalls that have plagued perceptual measures. In about all of the studies using perceptual measures, climate are administered at one time and the results are seen as the climate of an organization. This type of "hypodermic needle"[3] approach has ignored the dynamic nature of organizations.[4] Questionnaires that are administered on a one-time only basis treat organizations as static, and not dynamic entities. A trained observer

who made a longitudinal study of an organization could record observed climate over a period of time, which might give a better insight into the climate of an organization as opposed to a questionnaire. Climate questionnaires could be continued to be used, but they would need to be administered more than once to see if there was any consistency to the perceived organizational climate. Climate questionnaires need not be eliminated, but alone they do not yield objective information about the climate of an organization. However, if they were used in conjunction with objective measurements (non-participant observers), they might better describe the concept of organizational climate. The non-participant observer could gather data on an organization and derive from his/her observations characteristics he/she thought were representative of the organizational climate. The workers would be administered a climate questionnaire several times over the same time period that the observer was present. Factors that were consistently yielded from the questionnaire could be compared to the characteristics of the climate described by the observer. This method of research, though time consuming, might help determine if perceptually-derived data represented the actual work environment.

Though the prior recommendations might not eliminate all the problems in organizational climate research, they might help alleviate some of the controversies outlined in this review. The individual-organizational attribute controversy would be resolved by treating the climate perceived by the worker as an individual attribute, and that described by the observer as an organizational attribute.

The perceptual-consensus controversy might never be eliminated. Due to people's expectations, attitudes, beliefs, etc., employees will probably fail to reach a perceptual consensus about their organizational climate at one time or another. Two qualified non-participant observers may fail to come to a consensus in describing the climate of an organization

as well. What a longitudinal study would hope to explain would be the inconsistencies in perceived organizational climate among workers. If workers failed to come to a perceptual consensus consistently, an analysis could be made of the workers who failed to agree with other workers about a perceived organizational climate. An observation of their environment could possibly give insight into why they perceived the climate differently from their fellow workers.

The climate-satisfaction controversy is one that may never be completely resolved. As stated before, it seems improbable to expect workers to describe their work environment (climate) without making affective evaluations of their environment (satisfaction). What may be a climate questionnaire in one researcher's study could easily be a job satisfaction questionnaire in another researcher's study. About the only plausible recommendation that can be made would be the re-writing and editing of all climate questionnaires so that they contain as few evaluative terms as possible.

The researcher in organizational climate has stagnated over the past few years after a flurry of studies utilizing perceptual measures. What needs to be done is the re-evaluation and research of this concept utilizing more objective and dynamic measures in conjunction with past perceptual measures.

NOTES

1. In one study, students were presented with a mixture of items from organizational climate and job satisfaction scales and were asked identify which were which. They were unable to do so (Schneider, 1974). The author presented students in his organizational communication seminar with the first item on the Litwin and Stringer Organizational Climate Questionnaire (Form B), and asked them if they thought the item came from a satisfaction or a climate measure. Half of the class incorrectly identified the item as coming from a climate questionnaire.

2. Guion's call for objective-validation measures in the study of organizational climate, though made nine years ago, has by and large been ignored by climate researchers.

3. My apologies to Berlo.

4. For a study that demonstrates the dynamic nature of organizations, see Roberts, K.H. & O'Reilly, C.A. Organizations as communication structures: An empirical approach. Human Communication Research, 1978, 4, 283-293.

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